

## Sermon

### The Seven UU Principles

Roger K. Howe – 2017-08-06

The Seven UU Principles are an interesting topic for a Sunday service. When asked to speak on this subject, my reaction was “I know the seven principles; easy!” Then I began work and discovered first one thing and then another. It has been an interesting journey, one which I will now share with you. Please fasten your lap straps.

There is a level at which we all just sort of accept them as a given – we read them; we agree with them; now we’re done. I had you read them differently at the beginning of this service to emphasize something – that we covenant to affirm and promote each of the seven principles.

Let’s unpack that a little.

Covenant. A covenant is like a promise, right? Only it is a mutual promise that we make to one another. That makes it sort of like a contract, only a contract is a legal thing and a covenant is a moral thing. Contracts often seem as though they are made to be enforced – when one party fails to abide by the contract, the other is permitted some recompense. But we understand a covenant as being a mutual agreement that we expect to be difficult, that we expect we will fail to abide by at times, but that we will forgive ourselves and one another when lapses occur, understanding that we are all striving to be our best selves, but not expected to be uniformly successful. And it’s not easy – after all, if it were easy, why bother with the covenant? Covenants are for hard stuff.

How about that? Is that sort of how you understand “covenant” too? I hope so. If you don’t exactly agree, please cut me a little slack, a little wiggle and interpretation room. We can talk about it after the service is over.

OK. We covenant to affirm and promote. Well “affirm” is easy. We read them, we agree, we affirm. That’s pretty vanilla isn’t it? I was raised as a Unitarian, and I was taught things like the seven principles by my parents and the Unitarians around me; when I encountered the principles as an adult in my middle years, my reaction was sort of a “yes, that’s a Unitarian thing, I like that.” That was affirmation.

About twelve years ago, I attended GA and somewhere in those five days it hit me – this is not a friendly affirmation, it is a call to action. So, from here on, I will drop the “affirm” part and focus on the hook: “promote.” Promote is an active verb. It implies some activity oriented at, directed toward, a goal. If we are promoting a set of principles, must it be that we want everyone to believe in them? Well, that might be interesting, but if everyone believed and no one behaved, that wouldn’t accomplish much, would it? No, my friends, convincing other people is not the goal. The goal is a world community that behaves as if those seven principles were of paramount

importance. So, when we covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles, we are talking not about giving them lip service, we are talking about moving the world to act as if those principles were the bedrock of existence. Now, that is a call to action if ever I have heard one.

OMG! You say. Roger is crazy. How am I to change the world? How are a few thousand UUs to change the world? It can't be done!

And maybe you're right. Maybe it can't be done. But we didn't specify a requirement for success, we only specified a covenant to promote. Which means that whether we believe we can succeed or not, we have committed ourselves to work towards an end, and it seems to me that the end is a change in the world order.

And what does that look like?

The first principle calls us to promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. EVERY PERSON. Not just the people we like or respect. EVERY person. The homeless. The idle rich. The ignorant. Our president. Republican congressmen. Pro-lifers and pro-choicers everywhere. Bigoted, intolerant, born again fundamentalist Christians (or Moslems, or Jews, or Hindus or Buddhists, for that matter). It is not that we have to talk about everyone having inherent worth and dignity. We are called on to act as though every person has inherent worth and dignity. No matter who they are. No matter how much we disagree with them or disparage what they do.

If that sounds like a tall order, I suggest you take a course on compassionate communication to see how this might work. It's not easy.

The second principle calls us to promote justice, equity and compassion in in human relations. That seems to me to follow from the first principle – if every person has inherent worth and dignity, then every person should be treated with justice, equity and compassion. So, maybe that one is easy, after all, it's just a follow-on to the first principle. But that presupposes that you really worked hard on yourself to get that first principle totally imbedded into everything you think and do.

The third principle calls us to acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. Well, it seems to me that acceptance of one another is part of the first principle. Encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations also seems like a no brainer once you have the first and second under control. Notice, however, that we are working outward from the center.

The fourth principle calls us to promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Boy is that loaded! Truth and meaning are two very different things – at least in my mind and maybe in yours too. Truth has something to do with being a verifiable statement about the world, the universe, in which we live, or how we live within it. Verifiable, to me, implies the scientific method. Maybe we'll get

into that someday, but not now. Meaning has something to do with what is going on inside of us, mental activity. It is really hard to do good science on most of our mental activities. We won't go into that today either. The point is that the search for truth and the search for meaning are very different searches. You can know a lot about cosmology, but that won't tell you why you are here, at this moment, in this room; similarly, you may have an intense feeling about the meaning of this morning's experience in this place without knowing much at all about the history of the cosmos.

So, the search for truth and meaning are not the same search.

What about that free and responsible stuff? Free implies unfettered, unregulated, unrestrained; responsible implies constraints placed by some sense of what is morally right, or constraints placed by a sense of having to accept personally the consequences of what the search brings.

Ignoring the free part for a moment, what does that stuff about constraints and responsibility look like? Oppenheimer, and others of his Manhattan Project crew, were appalled by the destruction wrought by the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan as the closing act of the Second World War. Oppenheimer indicated his sense of his own guilt in the loss of lives due to a weapon he was in charge of developing. Truman is reputed to have responded that he was the one who ordered the bombs dropped; Oppenheimer was just being a crybaby. Who is responsible for the results, not just the proximate results, but the long-term results of our search for truth and meaning, and how do we bring that responsibility home to those who did the searching? And how do we reconcile that with the "free" search for truth and meaning – a descriptor clearly inserted to indicate that scientific inquiry should not be stifled by people who are likely to be discomfited by what we learn.

So, I present you with this set of issues surrounding the issue of what the words free and responsible and truth and meaning mean in this context, and how do we move forward to promote that view, especially in a world where much of our current scientific inquiry is conducted based on who is willing to pay for what research.

The Fifth Principle calls on us to promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. Again, conundrums. The right to object conscientiously when being asked to do something immoral is a right we would all uphold, but the issue of determining what is immoral is not entirely an individual one. Objectors to the war in Vietnam were exercising a kind of conscientiousness we understand; objectors to the war on fetuses – which is how some people characterize legalized abortion – object in ways we find distasteful. How do we establish how the difference is to be told?

But the use of the democratic process is pretty much a given, isn't it? But what is that democratic process? Popular vote? Electoral College? 50% majority to appoint a Supreme Court Justice, or a 60% vote? Filibuster or no filibuster?

I know, I know. I'm not making this easy, am I? But, somehow, I really don't think that making it easy was my goal.

The Sixth Principle calls on us to promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Oh, my gosh! An easy one for a change? Notwithstanding that we have a long, long way to go, here is a goal we can at least understand right off. But we're getting pretty spread out from the particular, individual human being (remember respect for the worth and dignity back in Principle one?). And we're about to fall off the brink into:

The Seventh Principle, which calls on us to promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. OK. Let's talk about that interdependent web for a moment. How many of you believe in the interdependent web of all existence of which each and every one of us is a part? Don't be shy – show me hands.

OK. How many of you actually feel as though you are part of a single larger organism, a web of existence in which you are merely one of billions of component parts, each contributing, each receiving benefits from being part of the web, much like each cell in your body is part of an interdependent web of existence? I firmly believe I am part of such a web, but I don't feel like a part of a web. I feel like an individual human being with inherent worth and dignity as an individual – and I don't know how I reconcile that with being just another cell in a vast array of cells doing things I don't even comprehend; though I do my part with inherent worth and dignity.

I am not done yet.

Are you alarmed or reassured? Maybe it should be a bit of both.

The points I have made, so far, are these:

1. The Seven Principles are not just to be read and accepted. They merit deep consideration of their meaning and implications for our lives and for what our society should be like if we live these principles. Make no mistake, I'm all in favor, but I think there is a lot of work to be done between the lines.

2. The Seven Principles are not a set of beliefs or assertions, to be made and left to lie fallow. They are to be incorporated into our daily lives – not the words, but the intent – to be a guide to us in how to live our lives. Even more, they are a call to action. A call to PROMOTE the reality they represent. This is not easy and it isn't going to get any easier as we walk farther and farther down the path.

3. The Seven Principles are about love – they are about love of one another, about love of peace and justice, and about love of our world. You cannot do the Seven Principles justice without love.

4. The Seven Principles are also about a dream – a dream of peace, a dream of mutual respect, a dream of opportunity for everyone. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed the dream much more aptly than I ever could.

Why do we covenant? Because it will be a struggle – it will be a struggle to understand what we mean; it will be a struggle to understand what we are to do; it will be a struggle to do the work.

Struggle is an interesting word. An early 20th Century politician wrote a book called “My Struggle.” He wrote it in German, in which the title was “Mein Kampf.” I do not recommend following his example. An early 21st Century version of struggle is the “jihad” – Wikipedia says Jihad is an Arabic word which literally means striving or struggling, especially with a praiseworthy aim – it means nothing about war or killing or revenge, even though it is used that way. About ten years ago, I became aware of a movement in San Francisco, a movement that may have been fictional, called the UU Jihad. My first thoughts for today’s talk included advocacy of a sense of UU Jihad.

The problem with the emphasis on the struggle is that it makes the whole thing so deadly serious and important. We are at risk of thinking so highly of our efforts and our goals that we become overbearing, pushy, elitist, authoritarian – risks that have befallen others. We are also at risk of alienating lovers and dreamers everywhere who believe in and hope for the world we visualize, but aren’t interested in or willing to spend effort on such things as parsing what “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning” really means.

Then I chanced to hear a song called “The Rainbow Connection.” Some of you may know it.

Let us pause and listen to the song now.

[The Rainbow Connection]

The final two lines are, “Someday we’ll find it, the lovers, the dreamers and me.” And I thought of us, struggling with the seven principles, dreaming and loving, mixing struggle with a healthy dose of humility and just a touch of sense of humor, and offering inclusivity to the dreamers and lovers who are not UUs, people who share our love of our world and our dream for a better, more respectful, more peaceful world filled with justice, but who may not be up for the intellectual struggle I have outlined here today..

I suggest to you that maybe this is the better way to portray what we do and where we are going. We are the lovers, the dreamers and we are all ourselves; we are the rainbow connection. And how wonderful that the song was first sung by a frog.